

Antonio Maria GENTILI

THE BARNABITES

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**Manual of history and spirituality
of the Order of Clerics Regular
of St. Paul Beheaded**

Chapter 1

I. HISTORICAL-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT: CATHOLIC REFORMATION

1. Protestant Reformation

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther (1483-1546) nailed his 95 theses on the door of All Saints castle church in Wittenberg. This gesture is usually viewed as the starting point of the Reformation. Actually, it was like setting fire to a fuse: in a short while the revolt spread throughout a large part of Europe. Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489-1525), a radical Anabaptist, helped incite the Peasants' War, which was then crushed by the German princes in the Battle of Frankenhausen in 1525. Afterwards, from Germany, the Lutheran reformation spread to the Scandinavian countries. In 1519 Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) introduced the Reformation in Switzerland with his lectures on the New Testament. However, his work suffered a serious setback when he was killed in the Battle of Kappel in 1531. John Calvin (1509-1564) met with much greater success. His *Institute of the Christian Religion* (1536) is one of the most influential theological works of all time. In 1541 he settled in Geneva. From there his teaching eventually spread to France (Huguenots), to the Netherlands, to England (Puritans), to Scotland (Presbyterians) and to Hungary. In 1534 the Act of Supremacy broke the union of the English Church with Rome and in 1549 the *Book of Common Prayer* was made compulsory by the Act of Uniformity.

The rapid spread of the Reformation in Europe clearly demonstrates that Luther's gesture was no quirk of one solitary eccentric. Rather, it was the symptom of a widespread malaise which caused many people to feel the need for the reform of Church *in capite et in membris* (in the hierarchy and in the faithful at large). This need was felt throughout the centuries and was never satisfactorily attended to.

2. The Church in a State of Crisis

In Medieval Europe the Catholic Church long labored under the feudal system, even though the damage it caused found some relief in the 11th century Gregorian reform. Later on, further damage was inflicted by the Avignon Papacy (1308-1378), which was immediately followed by the Great Schism (1378-1449), when two, and eventually three popes fought each other for the control of the Church.

The progressive decay at every level of Church life throughout the centuries must be attributed to a multiplicity of factors, to wit:

- clerical ignorance and immorality; laxity of religious orders;
- Church careers which were undertaken, not as a response to God's call but as a pursuit of self-interest, either on a personal level (desire for gain, prestige, and power) or on a family level (need of keeping a patrimony intact); accumulation of benefices divorced from their respective Church offices and, therefore, conducive to widespread absenteeism; worldly lifestyle of churchmen who were more often living at courts than shepherding souls;
- the mixing of spiritual authority with temporal power which led popes, bishop-princes and abbots to entertain political, rather than spiritual, concerns;

papal nepotism; the voracious fiscal policy of the Roman Curia, which alienated from the papacy vast areas of Christendom;

- secular governments' interference which gravely limited Church's freedom;
- the crisis in theology and the deterioration of preaching which resulted in an impoverished popular piety, ever more a prey of superstition.

The very Renaissance, instead of remedying this disastrous situation, aggravated it. It worsened the secularization of Church hierarchies and it seconded the paganization of society.

3. Ferments of Reform

Ferments of Church reform were at work for two hundred years before the Protestant Reformation. Suffice it to mention the English reformer John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384) and the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus (c. 1369-1415), both of them largely foreshadowed Luther's theses.

It must also be remembered that a number of contemporary Catholic saints endeavored to renew the Church from within, for instance, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Vincent Ferrer (1350-1419), Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444), and John Capistrano (1386-1456). The Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517), convoked to condemn the abusive council (*conciliabulum*) of Pisa (1511), also tackled the question of Church reform. In his opening address, Augustinian Giles of Viterbo called for personal renewal as a way toward institutional reform.

In 1513 two Camaldolese monks, Paolo Giustiniani and Vincenzo Quirini, drew up a lofty and concrete reform program and presented it to the new Pope Leo X urging him to intervene. However, the Pope was not up to the task.

In 1537, two decades after the failed Lateran Council, and as the Protestant tide had risen beyond the falling-point, a commission of cardinals, appointed by Pope Paul III, drew up fresh reform proposals. In the same year, a general council, open to both Catholics and Protestants was supposed to convene but never did. At long last, to his enormous credit, Pope Paul III was able to convoke the council that opened on December 13, 1545, in the northern Italian city of Trent, with some thirty Catholic bishops in attendance. On and off the Council of Trent lasted until 1563.

Devotio Moderna

The humanistic mentality, characterized by a historical and above all critical point of view, gave rise to an authentic Christian Humanism. Its major representative was Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466-1536), who devoted his life to laying the groundwork for a new theology based on the study of the sources: Scripture and Church Fathers, especially. The principal spiritual current of Christian Humanism is without a doubt *Devotio Moderna*. Born in the Netherlands, it spread to Western Germany. In Italy, its influence was limited, except in the Venetian territory. *Devotio Moderna* called for a return to Christian interiority and emphasized the affective dimension of Christian life. Strongly Christocentric, it was affectively attracted to the humanity of Christ, especially to his Passion, and to the Eucharist. It emphasized self-knowledge, the fulfillment of obligations, self-abnegation and effort of the will. An outstanding contribution to the work of such personal renewal was made by the Canons of St. Augustine of Windesheim and the Brethren of the Common Life. They owed

their beginnings to Geert Groote and Florentius Rasewiins. The masterpiece of *Devotio Moderna* is the *Imitation of Christ*, a work ascribed to Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471).

In France, a pre-Lutheran and orthodox reform movement was represented by the so-called Evangelism. This movement, akin to Christian Humanism and *Devotio Moderna*, called for a return to the spirit of the Gospel. Its center was the Circle of Meaux, founded about 1521 by Bishop Guillaume Bricconnet (1472-1534) and made famous by his vicar general, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (c. 1461-1536).

In Italy, as well as in other parts of Europe, and reaching back to the 14th century, the so-called *Observantes* took hold. In older religious communities, *Observance* meant returning to the original ideals of the Order. For instance, the above mentioned Bernardine of Siena and John Capistrano were members of the Franciscan Observants. In 1404 the general chapter of the Servites decreed the revitalization of eremitical life at Monte Senario in Tuscany under the direction of Blessed Anthony of Siena. Through the energetic leadership of Nicholas of Perugia, superior general, (d. 1460), the restored eremitical life at Monte Senario gave rise to the Congregation of the Observance.

The Camaldolese experienced this renewal through the Congregation of Hermits of Monte Corona founded by the above mentioned Paolo Giustiniani. Serafino Aceti da Fermo (1469-1540) led a similar renewal for the Canons Regular of the Lateran Congregation.

Other religious communities who experienced the same revival were: the Augustinians, with the above mentioned Giles of Viterbo and Girolamo Seripando; the Dominicans, with Sebastiano Maggi in Lombardy and Girolamo Savonarola in Tuscany; above all, the Franciscans: in 1517 the separation between Conventuals and Observants became final and complete and in 1528 the new Franciscan Order of the Capuchins was formed.

In Spain (in the wake of the Council of Trent) the Carmelites were reformed through Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Reforms associated with the diocesan clergy are still inadequately known, but, for instance, historians list a number of reforming German bishops of the 15th century.

Oratories

Still other reform movements were the Oratories. The main idea of their members (clergy and laity) was to achieve personal sanctity by means of good works on behalf of others. Self-reform was to precede Church reform. In 1497 the *Oratory* of Divine Love, the first organized form of this movement, was founded in Genoa, by a layman, Ettore Vernazza (d. 1524), a disciple of St. Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510). Similar groups were then formed in Rome, Naples, and in the Venetian territory. In 1500 the Augustinian Giovanni Antonio Bellotti (d. October 27, 1528) founded the *Oratory of Eternal Wisdom* in Milan, which was eventually led by Venerable Arcangela Panigarola (d. 1525). An outstanding manifestation of this movement was the Roman Oratory that rose around St. Philip Neri in 1552. By 1575 a new religious community was established, the Congregation of the Oratory (Oratorians).

The ground where the Observant and the Oratorian movements met gave rise to new religious orders. On the one hand, the revitalization of Monastic and Mendicant orders appeared to be inadequate for Church reform; on the other hand, Oratorian communities seemed to be too elitist and inward looking. There was a need for new associations that would keep the basic values of traditional monasticism and would build on the Oratorian

experience. In addition, they would adopt innovative forms of spiritual and apostolic activities.

Thus it was that Oratories, unawares, primed many of their numbers for future religious foundations. At times, the Oratories themselves evolved into new religious Orders.

Clerics Regular

This was the case of the Clerics Regular (Theatines), founded in Rome by St. Cajetan Thiene in 1524; the Sons of St. Paul (later known as Clerics Regular of St. Paul or Barnabites), founded in Milan by St. Anthony Mary Zaccaria, in 1530; the Servants of the Poor (later known as Clerics Regular of Somasca or Somascans), founded in Venice by St. Jerome Emiliani in 1534; the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) founded in Paris by St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1534; the Reformed Priests of the Most Holy Virgin (later known as Clerics Regular of the Mother of God), founded in Lucca by St. John Leonardi in 1574; the Clerics Regular Servants of the Sick (Camillians) founded in Rome by St. Camillus de Lellis in 1582; the Clerics Regular Minor (Adorno Fathers) founded in Naples by St. Francis Caracciolo in 1588; the Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools (Piarists), founded in Rome by St. Joseph Calasanz in 1597.

Similarly, women felt the need for new forms of Gospel living that would enable them freely to serve God and neighbor outside the confines of the cloister. In the early 1530's the Angelics of St. Paul were founded in Milan by the Countess Ludovica Torelli of Guastalla and St. Anthony Mary Zaccaria. The Society of St. Ursula (Ursulines) was founded in Brescia by St. Angela Merici in 1535.

II. MILAN IN THE HIGH RENAISSANCE

Deeply scarred by the ravages of war, riots, and the plague, Milan was emerging from the worst period of its history, politically and religiously leaderless.

During the 1400's Milan had enjoyed moments of great splendor: the Sforza family built its castle, to which Leonardo had contributed enriching it with the celebrated frescos in the Sala degli Assi, besides creating the *Last Supper* masterpiece in the dining room of the St. Mary of Grace Dominican convent, where Fra Battista Carioni will reside. In 1457, Filarete started the construction of the Hospital Maggiore, the first in the world done by lay people, while the Duomo was taking shape dedicated to the Blessed Mother.

In the 1500's, instead, Milan experienced a down fall caused by the poor production both in agriculture and in the industry, a stagnating commerce, excessive taxes, and finally famine and plagues. The brilliant Sforza family era was coming to an ignoble end. From 1529 to 1535, Francis II, the last of the Sforzas, was merely a nominal ruler, and his ducky, a *de facto* dependency of the Spanish Crown.¹

¹ In 1521 Charles V entered Milan after the victory over the French troops. It is November 25, feast of **St. Catherine of Alexandria**: the people of Cremona turns to the Saint to implore the incumbent danger of the defeated and retreating troops who had threatened to destroy the Torrazzo. The prayer was heard, and the city was saved. From that moment the people reserved great reverence and devotion toward the famous martyr. Perhaps we tie to this episode, which created great resonance in the Cremona territory, the cult by Zaccaria and his first disciples toward St. Catherine under whose patronage, at the beginning, they entrusted the seat of the rising new institute of the Clerics Regular of St. Paul.

Religiously, Milan did not fare much better. Family interests, petty territorial and dynastic wars, diplomatic intrigue, patronage of the arts and humanistic literature took precedence over religious and ecclesiastical considerations.

Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, brother of Ludovic the Moore, was one of those who supported the famous Rodrigo Borgia for the Papacy, the future Borgia Pope, Alexander VI. From 1497 to 1519, his brother in law Ippolito D'Este I, who was never ordained a priest, was made an archbishop at 7, cardinal deacon at 14, and when only 18 was appointed administrator of the Ambrosian diocese of Milan by Alexander VI, but hardly put in an appearance in his diocese. He was also bishop of Ferrara, Narbonne, Modena, and Capua, but is best remembered for his patronage of mundane poet, Ludovico Ariosto, who dedicated to him his epic poem "*Orlando Furioso*." In 1519 he decided to yield the Milan diocese to his nephew, 10-year old Ippolito II d'Este, Lucrezia's son. The Pope's daughter, Lucrezia Borgia, was married to Ippolito's brother, Alfonso, her third husband. The whole transaction was authorized by Pope Leo X. The new cardinal was no better than his uncle. Ippolito II was archbishop of Milan, bishop of Lyons, Orleans, Autun, Auch, and Morienne, but is best remembered for beginning the construction of Villa d'Este in Tivoli and patronizing the composer Giovanni da Palestrina. From 1519 to 1560's, when he was finally succeeded by St. Charles Borromeo, he too had never once visited his Milan diocese.

Who was giving orders in the Lombard Church were not the bishops but the Duke Ludovic the Moore before and then Francesco II Sforza. They were disposing according to their whim of the ecclesiastical possessions and monasteries.

It is small wonder that rampant irreligion and moral laxity had become normal in this sheepfold without a shepherd. Given to gross immorality and unable to read the liturgical books, most of the clergy had lost the respect of the people and could not minister to their spiritual needs. In monasteries and convents, religious vows tended to be seriously disregarded. Churches had become dens of sordidness and neglected. The Holy Eucharist was confined to sacristies or to some forlorn nook, unlighted and unkempt. Preaching was confined mainly to Lent. Religious instruction was practically non-existent. The best lay people might receive the sacraments once or twice a year. Mass was a rare occurrence. Only a few people knew their basic prayers, including the Our Father.

Happily, ferments of reform were at work in the Lombard metropolis. A priest, Francesco Castellino da Castello (1476-1566), was about to establish his School of Christian Doctrine (1536). In 1500 Giovanni Antonio Belloli had established the Oratory of Eternal Wisdom.

III. THE ORATORY OF THE ETERNALWISDOM

There was probably only "*one small spark of fervor hidden in the ashes of those few souls*" who used to meet at the Monastery of St. Marta to participate in the meetings of a pious association, the *Oratory of the Eternal Wisdom*.

Finally, on July 4, 1522, feast day of the Dominican Antonino Pierozzi (bishop of Florence, then a Blessed, later a Saint), the French left Cremona. On that occasion the General Council of the City decreed that every year the date will be celebrated with the offering of two torches of white wax, three pounds each, to the church dedicated to him. We have to add that Blessed Antonino was honored even by the young Zaccaria. In fact, when, under the guidance of the Dominicans he prepared himself for the priesthood, he studied the theological-pastoral works, like the "*Summa Moralis*" and the so called "*Confessionale*" by Pierozzi. The same books will appear among the compulsory readings for the first Barnabites.

This Oratory was one of the centers of religiosity in Milan before the Council of Trent. There, the profound religious movements already affirmed in Europe, like *Devotio Moderna*, *Christian Humanism*, *Evangelism* and others, were finding a fertile ground for programs of Church renewal.

The Founder and Date of the Foundation

The founder of this pious society is not known; however, there are many versions. Some authors think it was the Dominican, Blessed Henry Suso, who died in 1366, but the weak point in this hypothesis is that it is based on the fact that he had written the "*Herologium Sapientiae*," and had characterized his entire life by "*the spiritual marriage with divine wisdom*."

Some consider the German mystic only a remote inspirer, and believe the founder to have been the Dominican, Father Isolani. However, this opinion is not upheld by valid arguments and one cannot understand why Father Isolani would not have established the oratory near a monastery of his Order.

Some, like Barelli, have attributed the foundation of the *Eternal Wisdom* to St. Bernardine of Siena or to Saint Joan of Valois, daughter of Louis XI, and sister of Charles VIII. At twelve years of age she married Louis, Duke of Orleans. When he became king in 1499, she became Queen of France. She was repudiated two years later and in the same year (1501) she founded the Order of the Annunciation at Agen where she died in 1505. She had never visited Milan and may have favored the confraternity indirectly, by urging Giovanni Antonio Bellotti (+November 27, 1528), who was being transferred there to promote piety and to institute some pious association.

This Bellotti may have been the founder of the *Eternal Wisdom* (although this is not certain) as testified by Fr. Mazenta who had access to valuable materials in St. Marta's Monastery. He is probably the only historian who has researched this subject at length.

Fr. Bellotti of Ravenna was an Augustinian transferred to France. He was given charge of the Order's abbey of St. Anthony near Grenoble. He must have known the French royal family, since Charles VIII had a special affection for those Religious. When he went on an expedition to Italy with his court, he stopped at every Abbey between Grenoble and Vienna. It is natural, therefore, that his sister should have been interested in that Congregation and would have spiritual ties with Bellotti. This is why some authors attribute to her the original idea of an oratory. In fact Fr. Mazenta affirms it by stating that when in 1499 Louis XII conquered the Duchy of Milan, Joan sent Bellotti to Italy to further religion in the new dominion. She thereby hoped to bring peace "*between soldiers and citizens and to prevent the usual sins between conquerors and conquered*."

Even later Saint Joan patronized the confraternity because Bellotti's holiness and his rare eloquence would not suffice to explain how he, a total stranger in Italy, could so readily succeed in founding such an aristocratic society in Milan. He must have had powerful help and the support of the French court for the new confraternity, to enroll the most illustrious French personages who had gone to Milan during that period.

Still, according to Fr. Mazenta, the founding date of *Eternal Wisdom* was 1500. It was therefore contemporary with and not later than the Institution of Divine Love in Rome.

Origin of the Name

The source of the name *Eternal Wisdom* is not known. It could have been inspired by the work of Henry Suso or suggested by Panigarola, who seems to have had a special devotion to this divine attribute personified in the Word. Her revelations drafted by Bellotti, and preserved in the Ambrosian Library, make explicit mention of the *Eternal Wisdom*.

“On the first of August,” the Augustinian writes, without mentioning the year, “dedicated to the Eternal Wisdom, that servant of the Lord was staying in the oratory to pray for the disciples of the Wisdom... when she was elevated in spirit and saw the Lord in human form seating on a high chair and so beautiful...; while this soul was in this situation, her angel who was guiding her told her: ‘be careful that now you will see coming all the disciples of the Eternal Wisdom.’ Right away she saw coming a great multitude of men and women whom she knew in this mortal life, dressed with the habit they were wearing, as a friar, as a nun, as a religious, as a lay person.”

This title could also be indicative of the confraternity's singular educational goal.

Seat of the Eternal Wisdom

The seat of Eternal Wisdom was the Augustinian monastery of St. Marta, now destroyed, and remembered only because the street still bears the name. This place was chosen because the religious there belonged to Bellotti's order, and the monastery had become a center of deep spirituality, not only because of the sanctity of the Countess, Blessed Veronica Negroni, but even more by the marvels told about the incumbent prioress, Arcangela Panigarola (+1524).

Unlike the oratories of Divine Love in Rome and Genoa, the number of members of the *Eternal Wisdom* was not limited, and the discipline of secrecy was not in force. Anyone could enroll: regular and secular, ecclesiastics, nuns, lay people of both sexes, so that it became the seminary of all the finest works in Milan and an assembly of the most spiritual people.

Among the members of the confraternity were Cardinal William Bricconnet and his sons, Bishop William and Dionysius; James Simonetti, Bishop of Perugia; Msgr. Landini, auxiliary of Cardinal Ippolito d'Este; Gaston (called either de Foix or Lautrec), Maximilian and Francis II, Dukes of Milan, and the king of France, Francis I of Valois.

From some of Panigarola's letters preserved in the Ambrosian Library, one can glean the Countess' influence on the Bricconnet partisans. In her letters concerning the secret meeting in Pisa, she exhorts them to submit to the Pontiff.

The Barnabite authors include three Popes among the confraternity members: Leo X, Pius IV, and St. Pius V. Even if they were enrolled, Cardinal John Angelo de' Medici and Michele Ghislieri could hardly have been active members. The former was in Milan only a short period as a French hostage; the latter, born in 1504, had entered the Dominicans at a very young age. He pursued his studies in other cities and could only have been in Milan when the *Eternal Wisdom* was about to dissolve.

Zaccaria and his first two companions, as well as Fra Battista Carioni da Crema, and the Countess Ludovica Torelli certainly were active members. Fr. Carioni seems to have been a member during his sojourn in Milan before his acquaintance with Msgr. Landini, the successor of Bellotti, who had died in 1528. In 1531, Landini advocated, with high praise, Fra Battista's book, *"Knowledge and Mirror over oneself."*

Fr. Mazenta rightfully sustains that the *Eternal Wisdom* did not simply dissolve, but gave birth to the Company of St. Paul. Through a marvelous metamorphosis, it became transformed into the Congregation for Clerics, the Sisters of St. Paul, as well as that for married couples.

There is also an interesting episode, always about Arcangela Panigarola: in 1518, while absorbed in prayer, she received the revelation that from the Eternal Wisdom will come out “new ministers who with their apostolic works and exemplary life would bring honor to the discipline of the church people and the customs of the people.” (Bonora)

Anthony Mary will remind his first followers about this prediction, as he wrote:

"If you only knew, you would see how many promises have been made to different saints about this blessed renewal! All of them have to become a reality in the sons and daughters of our divine Father, unless Christ would want to cheat them: which he cannot do, since he is always faithful to his promises" (Lt VII).

The spirit of the Confraternity

We do not know precisely the internal life of the association, the statutes by which it was governed, the form or frequencies of its meetings, or the activities of its members. If in 1522, the Senate consigned to them the reform of the clergy, it is very likely that one of the chief goals must have been their own renewal and the reception of the Sacraments, the revival of piety, and improvement of customs not only of the people but even of priests. This spirit has spread especially among the Congregations which have branched out from it.

Another characteristic must have been the care of the sick widely practiced by the Countess and the Angelic Paola Antonia Negri, as well as Fr. Ferrari and Fr. Morigia.

It does not seem that the illustrious persons already named were in any position, before joining the Eternal Wisdom, to bring much spirituality to the confraternity. A large number of them had been born and resided in France. Even during their stay in Milan, they were distracted by the tasks imposed by their offices and could not attend meetings regularly. On the other hand, several ones, like Briconnet and Gaston de Foix, were not so submissive to pontifical directives which could have given a decisive and positive thrust to a much needed reform.

We do not know if the first members were slowly replaced by others more capable of fostering religious renewal. There were always souls in the Confraternity capable of promoting and favoring renewal; the spiritual trends seemed to accentuate after the deaths of Giovanni Antonio Bellotti, Arcangela Panigarola, Zaccaria, and Torelli. These had given the meetings the character of spiritual conferences (*Collatio*) in which each participant shared with the rest any thought which could contribute to their edification.